

Teaching Philosophy

Discovering that I wanted to make the teaching of writing my life's work was a long process. Though I loved reading from a young age, my experiences with writing were always more complicated. I suffered, like many students, from the apprehension of not being able to tell the difference between good and bad writing until an outside source such as a teacher informed me how I did. Effort seemed to have little correlation to achievement, adding to my frustration. It wasn't until well into my undergraduate career—more than a year after I reluctantly declared English as my major—that the light finally came on about writing; it was then that I decided that making that light come on for others and saving them from years of frustration was the work I would set for myself.

Since then I've gathered a wide range of experiences, which includes time spent as a Writing Fellow (a peer-mentoring, writing-in-the-disciplines program), a writing center tutor, a graduate instructor, and a full-time adjunct shouldering a 4/4 load of composition classes. I've earned degrees that cover the breadth of composition in the English department from a literature-focused BA to a creative writing MA to a technical communication and rhetoric PhD. I've taught in traditional, hybrid, and fully online programs. All these experiences have informed my teaching philosophy, which I present under the four following topics: increasing agency, ensuring access, encouraging transfer, and reflecting on my practice. An additional section at the end specifically discusses my approach to online instruction.

Increasing Agency. The core of my teaching is that I am always endeavoring to increase my students' agency, that is, their power to choose, to act, and to affect the world around them. Because many students enter my classroom as passive consumers of education and somewhat resentful at having to take a required writing course, I strive to help them feel in charge of their own learning and growth as writers. Among my practices for achieving this are the following:

- I make our learning objectives clear not only at the outset but with each major project, helping students see that the coursework is not the end but the means to an end.
- I talk honestly with students both in class and one-on-one about how that end may be different for each of us, and I encourage students to choose paper topics and time management strategies that fit their individual goals, which they define through reflective assignments.
- I invite formal and informal feedback from my students throughout the semester, and I draw attention to the ways I alter lessons and assignments as a result so that students can see their agency in action.
- I employ a grading system that rewards effort and achievement and that does not penalize students for trying and failing.

Ensuring Access. I endeavor to accommodate myself to the learner rather than force the learner to accommodate my style or interests. I recognize that my own path toward learning how to write effectively isn't the only path, that my struggles as a student aren't the only struggles students have, and that my learning style doesn't necessarily match my students'. Thus, my teaching is variable; I adapt it to the needs of my learners each semester. Some of the ways I promote access include the following:

- In the classroom, I use a variety of approaches and techniques so that visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners as well as introverts and extroverts can all more easily engage with the material and with each other.

- Outside of the classroom, I employ an online space (currently Slack) because doing so gives those who are shy or who desire more time to consider their responses an opportunity to participate on their own terms.
- I often require students to seek out or even create their own instructive materials to supplement my chosen readings and activities.
- I work hard to lower the stakes of engagement by creating a no-judgment zone, by validating student comments and interaction, and by grading most formative assessments on effort rather than achievement.

A final way I ensure access is by making sure all my websites and course materials are fully accessible to anyone regardless of differences in vision, hearing, mobility, or other factors.

Encouraging Transfer. I always encourage my students to keep their eye on the larger picture. My assignments and teaching are never focused on showing students how to succeed in my own class or how to write a paper I'll respond favorable to; instead, my instruction, assignments, and assessments focus on helping students develop an ability to see their work as a reader would see it in a real-world context. In this way, I hope to help them develop an ability to identify the principles of effective writing that would apply in any situation and thus leave my class with useful skills rather than basic procedural knowledge of a few genres. To that end:

- Rather than assign all my students a single textbook, I allow them to choose from a list the textbooks that best relate to where they are in their writing development and where they hope to go.
- Rather than use a single, general rubric for each writing project, we discuss in class how the conditions of success vary with topic, audience, discipline, and other factors, and we create a context-specific rubric/checklist together.
- I seek additional dialog about effective writing by encouraging students to meet with me face-to-face or online for grading conferences wherein each paper is assessed based on the situation it invokes.
- Students write periodic reflections wherein they are specifically asked to consider how things they are learning in our class might apply to other classes, their future careers, and their private lives.

Reflecting on My Practice. This last topic concerns how I continue improve as a teacher. Donald Schön studied how professionals, as opposed to amateurs, reflect on their actions both during and after they occur, comparing those actions to their mental model or theory of how their work is best performed. This reflection leads to small changes to actions either as they occur or in their next iteration, and it can also cause a professional to revise his or her theories, further refining them and ultimately leading to better performance. As a teacher, I think of myself as a professional of this type, and I consistently reflect on what I do to discover ways of improving my work. Some of this reflection is informal, but much of it happens as I keep a teaching journal, as I discuss my decisions openly with my students during and after a semester, and as I perform careful assessments to gather data with which to more objectively evaluate my progress.